Review Article

Gold and Megalithic Activity in Prehistoric and Recent West Borneo. Tom Harrisson and Stanley J. O'Connor. Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, Data Paper No. 77. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1970. xiv, 331 pp., tables, plates, notes, appendices. $4.00 (paper).

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The book presents a detailed study of both gold and "Megalithic" data from West Borneo. Gold activity, including mining, smithing, and jeweling, was much more important in West Borneo than has hitherto been realized, but was rather recent; very little can be dated before A.D. 1000. Although the Chinese have worked gold extensively since 1756, all the evidence from earlier periods points westward through Java rather than to China.

The authors link gold, iron, and megalithic activity closely together in West Borneo, and there appears to be no linking of gold with stone-age cultures. Megalithic activity, of which the authors present evidence indicating that this is more extensive in Borneo than heretofore believed, is also recent and within the iron age. "Neither for gold nor for megalithics is there any evidence for a neolithic stone-age antiquity" (p. 192). Also, the authors add (p. 194), there is no evidence for any megalithic structure in Southeast Asia earlier than the start of the Christian era.

A preface by the authors and a quotation from Cheng Te-k'un's *Archaeology in Sarawak* (1969), poetically introducing the scene of the excavations, the Sarawak River delta, precede the text, which is arranged in four parts. Each part contains a number of chapters which are again subdivided. Notes to each part contain the references to the literature; there is no bibliography. Four appendices are added. The thirty-five tables accompany the text, while the fifty-nine plates are placed at the end of the volume.

The first part deals with the geographical setting and the history of the Sarawak River delta, and indicates the location of the three main site complexes. Part Two, "Gold in Borneo," describes in detail the finds at each site, as well as pieces found in the past of which the provenience is not known. All gold excavated in the Sarawak River delta is associated with T'ang or later imported Chinese stonewares, and forms a part of grave goods. The gold, which had been either panned from the river sand or mined from upland limestone crevices, was worked into thin foil. The leaf-shaped pieces from the funeral sites may have served to cover the eyes of the dead, a custom also known for the Philippines. Objects of solid gold are very rare, but may have existed before they were sold to Chinese workers or looted. However, the inventory of all gold pieces excavated suffices to prove that the possession of gold was once widespread through West Borneo, and that after A.D. 1000 the technique of smithing improved considerably. The richest gold find was made in 1966, when the Bongkisam site near Santubong was excavated. It could be dated to the beginning of the fourteenth century, a period when maritime trade and ironworking were still at their height in the river delta. The nature of the 142 gold pieces, which were partly enclosed in a silver box, gives evidence of the Hindu-Buddhist influence that swept over Indonesia at the time of the Madjapahit Empire, overlying indigenous cultures.

At Bongkisam the basic architectural features of the more ancient Jaong site are recognizable,

but show the new element of a platform. The gold, though still mostly foil—the silver box containing a golden linga—offers unmistakable proof of the alien religious influence. The gold is cut into various shapes of animals such as elephant, tortoise, and snake, symbols of deities of the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon. Besides objects of stone, semiprecious stones, beads, and pottery, there are two human figures. This is discussed in great detail, and the assemblage termed "the tantric shrine," though one may wonder what connection there is with Tantrism, the secret meditation practices mainly known for Tibetan Buddhism. Also described in Part Two are other major gold pieces from West Borneo, such as the Limbang Hoard (dealt with previously in the *Brunei Museum Journal*, vol. 1, 1969), the golden regalia of the Sultan of Brunei, and a golden *keris* handle. Comparisons with gold on Indonesian islands, especially Nias, in the Philippines, and on the Malay Peninsula conclude the section on gold.

The second part of the book establishes Borneo as an eldorado, a land of gold. In part three, "Megalithic and Micro-Megalithic," the western part of the island emerges as a center of megalithic activity. An introductory remark defines *megalith* and *micromegalith*. The former term is limited to the huge monuments of prehistoric times. Introducing the latter term, the authors assign to closely spaced pebbles the rank of dolmen and menhir, microsiblings through stone! This aspect permits a new approach to the linkage of gold and stone. From this viewpoint Borneo's megalithic is surveyed and the archaeological sites are reexamined. The first chapter of part three deals with the megalithic in historical West Borneo. There follows a detailed discussion of the various situations that cause megalithic activity among present-day peoples. The numerous menhirs in the rice fields and under trees are connected with jar burials. Of these menhirs no less than fourteen were visible from one spot.

Information was gained from old people, who relied on the accounts of their forefathers. The stones came from an island at the coast, and moving them to the destination took several days. This was a dangerous undertaking in the time of headhunting. Whatever the reason was for erecting a stone, the ceremonies accompanying the event were much alike, and differed mainly in the number of buffaloes and pigs killed. The number killed depended on the number of days required for the emplacement of the stone. These feasts were repeated yearly. Memorializing, status raising, distribution of property, and funerals were causes for megalithic activity. Menhirs, connected with jar burials, are of considerable antiquity, as such a jar, closely behind a menhir, could be dated to the early Ming period. Others were traditionally the burial places or marked the funeral rites of shamans or spirit mediums. Inserted here are two lively and detailed accounts by aged informants relating the transport and erection of stones in former times. Following further discussions of the function of menhirs, it is most appropriately remarked that involved psychological grounds would be needed to interpret the menhir as "phallic," a concept completely alien to the people. However, the menhirs may have been "sexed," as proved by two surviving figures of wood (wood as a substitute for stone!) which are said to represent a male and female respectively. Wood and stone are interchangeable in megalithic thinking, and originally wood may even have preceded stone. However, wooden structures have perished in the course of time, leaving at best some remains of charcoal.

The island burial places of the sea nomads *(orang laut)*, here called the Ubians, are included in this chapter dealing with the megalithic cultures of historic West Borneo. For centuries the Ubians have been Muslims, and to some degree have adopted an islamic pattern for their graves, as miniature stone menhirs. The burial sites are situated close to the seashore on islands at the northwestern tip of Sabah. Other features, such as a canopy on wooden posts, are indigenous. Here again is a case of an alien religion mixing with native religious practices. Very little is known about these sea nomads, and the passages dealing with them, including an appendix by Barbara Harrisson (her observations being as recent as January 1970), are most valuable contributions to ethnology.

Equally valuable ethnological data are presented in the following section, "The Living Megalithic of the Far Uplands," which deals with the northern Kelabits. Living in an area of 600 square miles at an elevation of 3000 feet, this people remained isolated and untouched by foreign influences. As their megalithic activities are mainly concerned with disposing of the dead and their remains, no less than twenty-one primary, secondary, and even tertiary burial methods are mentioned, the latter being the burial of the small bones of fingers and toes from a secondary burial in separate tiny earthenware pots. For primary and secondary burials, Chinese stoneware jars are placed at remote spots

marked by menhirs, dolmen, and stone seats. If a jar serves for primary burial, it is cut at the median joint with a red-hot wire to admit the corpse in a crouched position in the lower half. In this case no secondary burial takes place. The authors speak of thousands of jars having been used in the course of time. As funerary gifts glass beads and smaller stoneware vessels were used, and occasionally iron, but no gold. Gold was unknown in the uplands until recent times.

With the following chapter the authors return to prehistoric Borneo and discuss a set (30) of carved sandstone boulders in the Sarawak River delta, near the Jaong site. The petroglyphs, pecked out with a sharp metal point, are dated to about A.D. 1000, a period of intensive iron-working and trade in the delta. Besides having some geometric patterns and holes, they mainly represent the human figure, without indication of sex. Some of the human effigies have chips and holes, as if someone had been striking or spearing around them in a ceremony. These petroglyphs may have been part of a shamanistic or magic ritual, an interpretation supported by the absence of the aquatic animals or the boats that are seen on rock carvings elsewhere in the Pacific. Reference should be made here to plates 33–44 which accompany this section.

The following section gives a detailed report of the Jaong pebble-beds, a term introduced by the authors for the pebbled area of 1000 square feet in the Sarawak River delta. The working conditions at this archaeological site, dated to around A.D. 1000, were most difficult. As a result of erosion and flooding, the layers of sand, pebbles, and soil do not clearly overlie each other. A number of tables are helpful in explaining the complicated situation. Aside from sherds, gold foil and stoneware vessels were found, the gold in close association with pebbles. The same holds true for the small porcelain vessels, such as bowls and lidded boxes, of South Chinese origin. Their position in the pebble-beds is indicated by tables. Only a few pieces were found outside the pebbled sectors. The main text dates this porcelain to late T'ang and early Sung, around A.D. 1000. As Appendix D states, this dating was correct, as the puzzling pieces, according to Japanese scholars, had been produced at a little-known kiln near Canton which worked during the Five Dynasties period, A.D. 807–959. There can be no doubt that the stoneware vessels as well as the gold pieces were intentionally placed under the pebble-beds, which functioned as protection. Only a few fragments of unidentified bones have been found, but it is not out of question that the vessels may once have contained ashes of charred bones. Together with previously discussed instances of the close connection of stoneware with megalithic—for instance, the burial jars of the Kelabit—the vessels under the pebble-beds at Jaong further prove the linkage of ceramics with stone. A passage on the history of Chinese ceramics in Borneo and their importance for the people follows. It is believed that boats of Indonesian or Malaysian origin, and not Chinese ships, transported Chinese goods to West Borneo during the T'ang and Sung periods. A barter trade from place to place for smelted iron must have been going on. People were mainly eager to obtain the large jars that filled the need for storage and that could protect the remains of the dead, who otherwise were buried in slab graves or in sealed coffins which had to be stored in high places. As regards monochrome glass beads, of which there are detailed discussions with results of chemical analyses in a number of papers, it is here once more definitely stated that they do not derive from China, but from the West. Carnelian beads were very numerous and must have been manufactured in India and Burma. Quartz crystal beads are much less frequent.

The following chapter develops the micro-megalithic idea. Pebble-beds and the carved boulders are contemporary, and the authors regard the pebbles as an extension out from the rocks into the ground, each pebble representing a miniature boulder or a menhir. "To treat a pebble as seriously as a rock—or even as the child, or the sperm of the rock—could present no intellectual problem to Borneo people who regard wood and stone as interchangeable or an irrigation ditch equivalent to a menhir equivalent to a stoneware urn" (p. 147). It is the activity of using small stones or pebbles for the construction of terraces, walls, pavements and so forth that the authors term micromegalithic. The term micromegalith does justice to small stones the accumulation of which originates from the identical "idea" that led to the erection of monumental structures or large stones, commonly termed megaliths. Megaliths and micromegaliths do not belong to different systems, but are levels of one common expression of belief (p. 148). Drawing the conclusion from what has been quoted above—that not only is wood interchangeable with stone, but that an irrigation ditch is equivalent to a menhir, and a menhir equivalent to a stoneware urn—it becomes clear that the authors think that one can be

"megalithic" without any trace of actual megaliths. But this kind of reasoning would permit rationalizing any people anywhere into a megalithic role. Just as "totemism" was abused and used in such a diffuse meaning until very recently, so that it ceased to have any real meaning at all, to broaden the use of "megalithic" in this manner is to risk robbing the term of any scientific meaning whatsoever.

The archaeologic sites are again surveyed in the "micromegalithic mood," and other megalithic remains of the Bongkisam area are described, such as grave pillars, a stone block, and a "petrified dragon." A discussion of micromegalithic elements on the Indonesian islands, the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, Indochina, and India concludes Part Three.

Part Four presents a summary of the preceding parts, stressing such points of special importance as the dating of gold. Here it is perhaps not without interest to point to the small island of Botel Tobago, where goldsmithing never advanced beyond the stage of producing gold foil, traditionally shaped in the simple "ovai" form (a horizontal eight). On the Batanes islands, however, from where the Yami obtained the gold by barter, goldsmithing reached a high standard, and the goldsmiths, some of them women, still produce attractive ornaments. The working of gold on the Batanes was first reported by William Dampier at the end of the seventeenth century (de Beauclair, "Gold and Silver on Botel Tobago," *BIEAS* 27 [1969]: 121–127).

To enter into a discussion of the various points and ideas presented in this final part, interesting and often challenging as they are, is beyond the scope of this review. By bringing to light hitherto unknown facts from ancient and present-day Borneo, the authors have succeeded in establishing the island as a center for gold and megalithic activity both in the past and at the present. May this scholarly, stimulating monograph find the appreciation it fully deserves.